

Misha Interviews...

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Interview with Vugar Gashimov

Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, is perhaps one of the most productive chess cities in the world. Garry Kasparov, Emil Sutovsky, and Vladimir Akopian all hail from Baku and there is a new generation of highly talented players lead by Teimour Radjabov. I recently interviewed Azerbaijanian #3 Vugar Gashimov; an 18-year-old grandmaster who is currently the number one blitz player on the ICC. He talks about his chess achievements; his teammates; Garry Kasparov; Azerbaijanian economics; and the future of chess.

Misha Savinov: Vugar, tell me about your childhood and how you came to be a chess player?

Vugar Gashimov: I was born in Baku on July 24, 1986. My father is a retired army colonel who served at the Defense Ministry. He is a candidate master and taught me how to play when I was six. My mother is a biology teacher. I developed a great interest in chess quite early and decided to pursue a competitive career. I also enjoyed other sports and regularly participated in taekwondo, football, and tennis. When I was a kid I also wanted to become a professional football player and I still greatly enjoy this sport.



MS: Do you have any favorite teams?

VG: Sure, I root for the Brazilian national team, Juventus and Valencia.

MS: What did you prefer to study at school?

VG: My favorite subject was geography; maybe because I traveled a lot and wanted to know more about the countries I visited.

MS: What was your early chess training like?

VG: I first attended group lessons, but I dropped out quite quickly because it was too easy to beat the other students. More helpful for my chess

development was the rivalry between me, Radjabov, and Guseinov. I won a majority of championships where all three of us were present. My elder brother and I were also very competitive (smiles). He finished 3rd at the European championship in 1996.

MS: So, you improved mostly by playing, rather than from regular lessons with trainers?

VG: I also took individual lessons from IM Anar Allakhverdyev. However, I have no trainer at present.

MS: Who were your favorite players?

VG: I liked to study Alekhine's games, because of his attacking energetic style. Of the modern elite, I like Anand. In 1995, during the Kremlin Stars, I asked for his autograph and he amazed me by talking with a nine-year-old kid. But I never tried to copy anyone's play. I think my own style is sufficient; although it is sometimes useful to utilize others' experience with openings. I decided to add some lines to my opening repertoire after reading an interview with Victor Bologan. He said that learning an opening from the opposite side of the board brought him some key points at the Dortmund tournament. I adopted the idea and also started to play some openings from both sides of the board.

MS: Do you mostly study the games of players that you like? What are your favorite chess books?

VG: Yes, I studied a lot of Alekhine's games. Actually, I have quite a good chess library at home with books by Capablanca, Botvinnik, Karpov, and, of course, Kasparov. It was also beneficial for me to read Dvoretsky's series of books. Once, after reading his articles about bishops of opposite colors, I went to Batumi for the individual European championship and won two important games against Aronian and Jobava utilizing what I had learned. I am sure these books assisted me a great deal and my advice for you is to study them carefully.



MS: How much time do you usually allocate to studying chess?

VG: It is difficult to answer this question as I have been experiencing health problems since February of 2000 that have forced me to reduce my chess studies. Turkish brain surgeons have twice operated on me during the previous year to correct epileptic spasms, but unfortunately both were done incorrectly. I need another operation that must be done in Germany at Bonn's University of Neurosurgery Clinic. The problem is that I do not have enough money for that. Previously I could work up to 10 hours a day, but now I only prepare for particular tournaments. Nevertheless, my rating has increased and I stay in good form.

I think playing blitz has helped me to remain sharp. I started to play on the ICC after the second unsuccessful operation. Internet blitz improves my calculation speed, and this was something I needed to improve. My father always compelled me to keep my hands under the table because I played too fast, which often resulted in second-best moves. However, when I was in Alushta in 2002, GM Valentin Arbakov told me: "Blitz improves your chess if you play it properly." Now I see he was correct. One should make decisions according to the position and not play on time. Obey the laws of chess, "play correctly," and you'll benefit from it!

MS: What makes somebody a better blitz player?

VG: One needs to calculate quickly and be able to grasp the situation across the whole board instantly. A large part of success depends on having the right attitude and strong nerves. It is important not only in blitz, but also during time-trouble in classical time control tournaments.

MS: Vlad Tkachiev recently said that only blitz could make chess a spectator sport, because the intrigue is obvious even for the most ignorant observers. What do you think?

VG: He is right to some extent; blitz is certainly more spectacular to observe, but classical chess – this is proper chess. A speed game is too much of a lottery. Deciding a world championship with five-minute games is equivalent to substituting football matches with penalty shootouts. Conversely, classical chess definitely has no future on TV.

MS: Which time control do you prefer playing?

VG: I just love chess, so I want to play no matter what the time control – I am a professional player after all! I do not attend tournaments very often, so I play a lot of Internet blitz. Varying time controls do not bother me much.

MS: You never played for a club or had any tournament invitations?

VG: Unfortunately, I have never enjoyed any sponsorship. That's why I spend so much time playing on the ICC.

MS: The first time I read about you was when one of your games was featured in the Russian chess magazine *64*. You missed a forced mate-in-two and then lost after another major blunder. The author suggested your overconfidence causes you to lose your concentration in winning positions, was this really a problem?

VG: It is difficult to say, but I did experience difficulties converting winning positions. I missed three European junior titles and two world championship medals because of it. My only explanation is fate. However, I slowly overcame it and now sometimes I save such positions (smiles). For example, see Fedorov – Gashimov, Dubai 2004, and Gashimov – Jonkman, Antalia 2004.

MS: What competitions played a key role in your chess development? Batumi, 2002 is surely one of them.



The 1999 Kasparov Cup

VG: There were many such moments, but the Individual European championship in Batumi was one of them. I also have fond memories of the 1999 Kasparov Cup. I was just twelve, but I secured first place with one round to spare in the Under-16 age group. After the tournament Kasparov told me that I have a deep positional understanding with bright tactical vision. Receiving such a compliment from a world champion is extremely pleasing and inspiring! In Batumi I finished 6th and only the top five were eligible for the world championship. Another important event was the European championship in Turkey in 2004. I won as many games as the winner, Ivanchuk. We were separated by one point – I lost our individual game, then I lost to Agrest on tie-break and tied for 13th-16th.

MS: What was the most difficult game in your career thus far?

VG: One of the hardest was played in the last round in Turkey. I had Black against Anastasian. We both needed a win to enter tie-breaks, so it was expected that we would play as long as it takes. I got a great advantage in the opening and could have easily won a pawn, but I went for mate instead and Anastasian saved his king with only moves. The ending was equal, or more likely, drawn (smiles), but the game continued. It lasted six hours and I managed to squeeze out a win in the end!

MS: What do you think helps one to win in such situations?

VG: Good nerves and a desire to win, along with a lot of confidence. Again, I want to emphasize the nerves factor – it is a key component to most critical situations.

MS: How do you cope with the increasing tension as the tournament proceeds?

VG: The last 2-3 rounds are usually very stressful for everyone fighting for a high spot. It helps to adhere to a rigid schedule during the event. I like to relax outdoors and I recommend it to others – nature heals our nerves. Nature is beauty!

MS: Does your regimen detract from your social life?

VG: No, it doesn't (smiles). During tournaments I play football, billiards, or table tennis. I chat with friends and I don't decline reasonable suggestions of spending time (smiles). The friendly atmosphere is the most attractive part of tournaments – while spectators appreciate a tough and uncompromising struggle...

MS: What do you like to do when you are not playing or studying chess?

VG: I like to watch movies. I enjoy Jackie Chan films. He is an excellent comic actor, a true professional. I also enjoy strategy and computer games

and football.

MS: Do you have any long term objective in chess that you would regret not achieving?

VG: On December 25, 1998 I met the former president of our country, Geidar Aliev. I told him that I had five major goals and three of them were achieved that day:

- To become known in the chess world.
- To become an IM.
- To meet a president of Azerbaijan.

I achieved my 4th aim in 2002 and became a grandmaster. My 5th wish is to win the men's world chess championship – this is my primary objective. We'll see what happens in 50 years (smiles). My minimum objective is to participate in the final stages of the world championship.

MS: How would you describe your style of play?

VG: I consider myself a universal player: equally good in positional and tactical play. I also prepare special weapons for each particular opponent, depending on their strengths and weaknesses.

MS: What do you think you need to compete against the elite players on equal terms?

VG: To compete with the best one needs proper psychological preparation. It is essential to believe that you can play as strongly as they do and even beat them!

MS: Have you ever played Chess-960?

VG: No, never, but it's a funny game. I looked at some games from chess magazines.

MS: Are there any other chess-related board games you play?

VG: I have always played Swedish chess (more often called Bughouse; played in pairs, your partner passes you the pieces that he captures, and you put them on your board when it is your turn – M.S.) and I have played Loser's chess. However, I like other games more – dominoes, backgammon, cards etc. And I am good, too (smiles).

MS: There are a number of strong young players in Azerbaijan whom you have competed against your whole life! What is your relationship with them?

VG: Yes, we have a bunch of strong juniors (smiles). Our relations are quite good. We played each other in junior competitions, but now I don't meet my compatriots much. I played against Radjabov at the 2004 European championship in Turkey. I had an advantage, but he managed to draw. In the end I finished above them all (Radjabov, Mamedyarov, and Guseinov).



Gashimov and Radjabov

MS: But you all play lots of blitz on the ICC! It seemed as if there was a fierce competition for the #1 rating spot?

VG: Yes, there was a fight on ICC, but I emerged on top there as well (smiles). My handle is Diadematus; feel free to watch the games!

MS: I am curious to know your opinion about the arrangement of boards on your national team. Do you think it needs correcting?

VG: Presently, I believe that the players occupy the correct spots, but I would include Elmar Magerramov who works at the UAE now. There are only youngsters on our team and I am absolutely certain that adding such an experienced grandmaster as Magerramov would be beneficial for all of us, as well as for the team.

MS: Does the team share a common approach to chess?

VG: Yes, I think we have much in common, especially regarding openings. We have had many new ideas in the Dragon Sicilian and in a recent *New in Chess Yearbook* they named one variation an Azeri Gambit!

MS: Is there an explanation for such a chess boom? I don't think it is only explained by Kasparov's example.

VG: In general, the Azeri people are very talented and are natural fighters. Plus, there is tradition: Kasparov is the greatest player, but even before him there were the Makogonov brothers and Bagirov.

MS: What do Azerbaijanian's think of Kasparov? Is he loved and respected as before or are there any prejudices against him connected with the poor relationship between Armenia and Azerbaijan? We all remember why Garry had to leave his native city...

VG: Kasparov did not lose his popularity in Azerbaijan. We remember him, respect him, and admire him. When I won the Kasparov Cup on March 31, 1999, Kasparov said at the closing ceremony: "I am especially happy congratulating Vugar Gashimov, because I was born, grew up and even became a world champion in Azerbaijan!" He also mentioned that without Geidar Aliev's help he would not have become champion. Nobody forced Kasparov out of Azerbaijan. Despite the fact that Armenia occupied 20% of our land, created more than a million refugees and expelled all the Azeri people out of Armenia, there are still about 30,000 Armenians living in Azerbaijan... And if Kasparov didn't change his surname from Weinstein, there wouldn't be any problems at all! There are many Jews who live in Baku, and our nations are very friendly to each other. The Azeri people are most hospitable – ask those who visited our country!

MS: Does the state support young chess talents? What is the situation with chess in general?

VG: Some players receive regular state support, but I only received assistance in 1998 when Geidar Aliev signed a president's order to help Radjabov, Guseinov, Mamedov and I to develop our talents and promote chess. Mr. Ilkham Aliev, our current president, occasionally supported me when he was in charge of the National Olympic Committee. I think Radjabov and Mamedyarov also have private sponsors, but neither I nor other players enjoyed such outside help.

The situation with chess in general is quite bright. Many children study chess and it is taught at school on a regular basis. Our international successes have increased the interest in chess across the country. The only problem is that there are no major tournaments held in Azerbaijan. Our progress suffers from this.



Meeting with Mr. Ilkham Aliev

MS: Some people say that the number of chess talents in Azerbaijan is explained by the lack of prospects in other fields. Could you tell me a little about the state of the economy in your country?

VG: I do not support such an opinion. At present our economy is developing rapidly. Azerbaijan plays an important role as a strategic link between Europe and Asia. We are part of the Great Silk Path and we have oil. A major oil pipeline from Baku to Turkey will begin functioning in 2005, which attracted foreign investors as well as the world's superpowers. There is actually a lot of foreign investment, and not only in natural resources, but also in other sectors, such as agriculture. So I think we're on a right track.

MS: And, finally, my last question: when are you planning to win the chess Olympiad?

VG: When we participated in the 2002 Bled Olympiad, Kasparov told us that we would be a contender for the top three spots in the following Olympiads and that we would be able to win in 2008 or 2010!

Vugar Gashimov Annotates

Gashimov – Halkias

European Championship, Turkey, 2004

In the penultimate round I needed a win to keep my chances for tie-break alive.

1.e4 c5 2.c3

My choice of opening might look strange, as in a must-win situation most players stick to their regular schemes, but I have a different opinion.

2...Nf6 3.e5 Nd5 4.d4 cd4 5.Nf3 Nc6 6.Bc4 Nb6 7.Bb3 d5 8.ed6 Qd6 9.Na3!



The exclamation mark is not given for the objective strength of the move, but because it was a psychological attack that was successful. The main line 9.0-0 Be6 10.Be6 Qe6 11.Nd4 Nd4 12.Qd4 Rd8 is well-studied and probably known to my opponent.

9...a6

Black avoids the principled 9...dc3 10.Qe2 with sharp play.

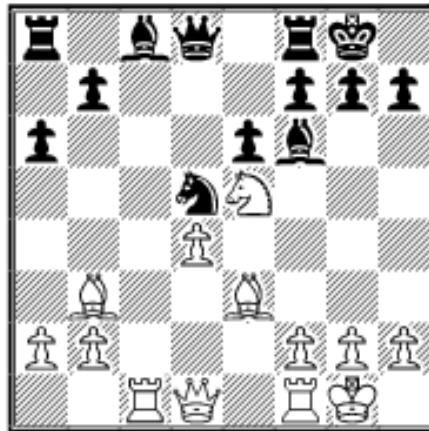
10.cd4 e6 11.0-0 Be7 12.Be3 0-0 13.Ne5! Nb4 14.Rc1!

This is stronger than any of the queen moves 14.Qf3; 14.Qg4; 14.Qh5. It is better to preserve the greater options and to choose between them later.

14...N4d5 15.Nac4

The knight has no future on the rim; therefore I would like to swap it for the opponent's more active pieces.

15...Nc4 16.Nc4 Qd8 17.Ne5 Bf6?!

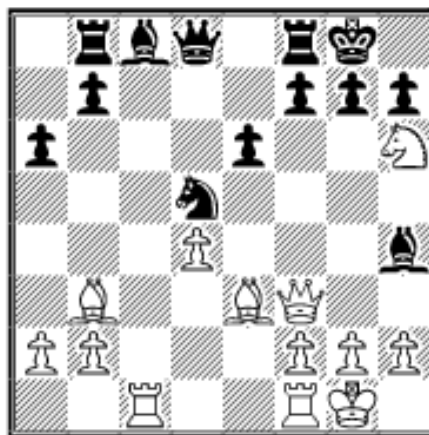


Better was 17... Bd7. White has two ways for an advantage: A. 18.Qf3 Bb5 19.Rfd1 += and B.18.Bd5!? ed5 19.Qb3 Bb5 20.Rfe1 f6 21.a4! Be8 22.Nd3 +=

18. Qf3! Rb8?

Black's position is already hard, so it was necessary to solve his development problems with a pawn sacrifice: 18...e5 19.de5 Bd7 20.Bd5 ed5 21.Qd5 Bc6, attempting to hold the position.

19. Ng4! Bh4 20. Nh6+!!



20...gh6 21. Bh6 f5

The only move. On 21...Kh8 22.Bf8 Qf8 23.Bd5 ed5 24.Qf4 wins, xBh4; xRb8.

22.Bd5 ed5 (22...Qd5 23.Qf4 +-) 23.Bf8 Kf8 24.Rfe1

White has a winning position. Black is underdeveloped and his pawn structure as well as his king are weak.

24...Bd7

Only here Black realized that it makes sense to develop something, but he ran out of time.

25.Qd5 Bc6 26.Qf5+ (gathering the trophies) 26...Qf6 27.Qc5+ Kg7 28.g3! Bg5

28...Qf3 also loses 29.Qe5+ Bf6 30.Qc7+ Kg6 31.Rc6 and 32.Qb8 +-

29.f4!

Now on 29...Bh6 30.d5 decides.

29...Bf4 30.gf4 Rg8 31.Rc3 Rf7 32.Rg3 Qh4 33.Qc4+ Black resigns.

Moiseenko – Gashimov

Chess Olympiad, Calvia, 2004

Ukraine led comfortably throughout the Olympiad and the Ukrainian team was in superb form. However, we wanted to prove that Azerbaijan is also a formidable opponent. My win against Eingorn in our previous encounter against the Ukraine sealed the fate of the match and we won 2½-1½.

1.Nf3

My opponent rarely opens with this move, but I had lost the three games in which I faced this move in 2004, so I had a feeling that Moiseenko would play this.

1...c5!

A surprise in return.

2.g3 Nc6 3.Bg2 g6 4.0-0 Bg7 5.c4 e6 6.Nc3 Nge7 7.d3 0-0 8.Be3

An English opening has emerged, which I often play as White. 8.Bd2 is stronger, because now Black could proceed with 8...Nd4 9.Qd2 d5! equalizing. However, I intended to play for a win, as always.

8...d6 9.Qc1 Nf5

In this position 9...Nd4 or 9...e5 also led to equality. My opponent possesses a fine positional understanding; so I wanted to complicate things by diving into tactics.

10.Bg5 Qb6 11.Rb1 h6 12.Bf4 g5 13.Bd2 Bd7



And, as you can see, I achieved my goal – Black managed to mix things up.

14.a3 a5

Not allowing an opening on the queenside with the b4 break.

15.Qd1 Qd8

Both sides are trying to improve the location of their pieces to the maximum.

16.Ne1 Qe7 17.Nc2 a4 (preventing b4 again) 18.Kh1?!

A dubious move; better is 18.f4!? with an attack. However, as I said, it does not really suit my opponent's style.

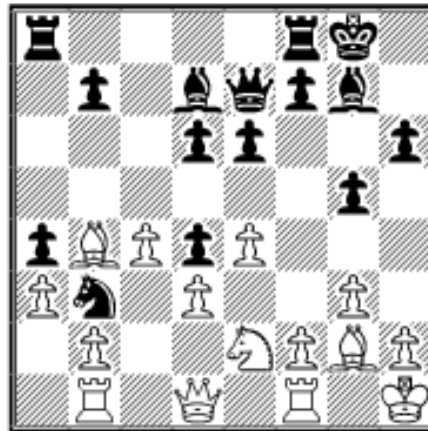
18...Na5

Since White loses time, Black is able to grab the initiative.

19.e4

Here 19.f4!? was also an option.

19...Nd4 20.Nd4 cd4 21.Ne2 Nb3 =+ 22.Bb4?



This was the last moment to create counterplay with 22.f4, although the effect would be much less significant.

22...f5!

Black begins to attack the opponent's king.

23.ef5

White underestimates the danger and accepts the sacrifice.

23...Rf5 24.Bb7 Raf8 25.f3?

A road to disaster! He should have played 25.Kg1, extending the struggle for a few more moves, but in time trouble White misses Black's winning shot.

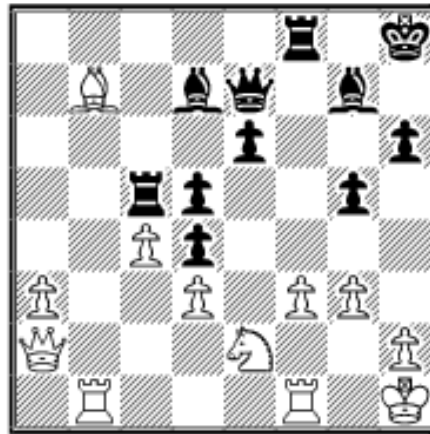
25...Nc5! 26.Bc5 Rc5

The bishop is trapped, 27...d5 is threatened.

27.b4

This thematic break desperately seeks salvation, but it is too late.

27...ab3 28.Qb3 Kh8 (renewing the threat of d5) 29.Qa2 d5!



30.Ng1

If 30.cd5 Bb5 31.Bc6 Bd3 32.Rb7 Qf6 33.Qd2 Be4! 34.Kg1 ed5, winning.

30...dc4 31.dc4 Ra5 32.Be4

32.Rb3 Ba4 33.Rb4 d3 34.Be4 Bc2 +-

32...Ra3

This is hopeless for White. The rest of the moves were probably made because of the nature of team events.

33.Qd2 Bc8 34.Ne2 Qc5 35.Qb4 Qb4 36.Rb4 Re3 37.Re1 d3 White resigns.



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